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ABSTRACT

In 1975, 263 low-income Kentucky youths aged 17-19 completed questionnaires about career aspirations according to desired job characteristics and perceived barriers to occupational attainment; the sample (approximately half male, half female) was from an urban inner city area in Fayette County (approximately half black, half white) and the two rural Appalachian counties of Magoffin and Wolfe (all white). Race, sex, and urban/rural differences were analyzed. The three most valued job characteristics were interesting and exciting work (slightly more for girls, blacks, and rural youth), steady employment (no differences), and chance to help other people (more for girls, blacks, and urban respondents). Least important was a chance to become an important person or to be one's own boss; making a lot of money was intermediate. The low-income youth did not seem greatly influenced by barriers to attainment. Lack of good job opportunities was perceived the most serious barrier (higher for girls, rural whites), followed by not enough money to go to college (higher for girls, whites), and leaving family and friends (higher for girls, whites). Other barriers of little perceived importance were lack of job information, race, sex, not smart enough, quality of school attended. Findings should be useful to schools, parents, and youths to suggest gaps in knowledge and perception base of young people. (RS)

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PERCEIVED OCCUPATIONAL BARRIERS
AMONG LOW-INCOME YOUTH
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by

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DESIRED JOB CHARACTERISTICS AND PERCEIVED OCCUPATIONAL BARRIERS
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Larry D. Hall and A. Lee Coleman

One of the most important decisions a person makes is the choice of an occupation. One's life chances, economic well-being, and sense of self-worth are significantly influenced by that choice. Since the American occupational structure relies heavily on education and training, usually acquired during adolescence and early adulthood, young people need to begin choosing and preparing for a career as early in life as possible. The career preferences one has in youth, as well as the things one perceives as barriers to attainment of a desired occupation, are likely to exert considerable influence on the kind of job one eventually attains. For it is not only one's desires but also one's perception of the likelihood of attaining them that so strongly influence the motivation and drive to achieve.

These matters are particularly important in the case of youth from low-income and deprived backgrounds. Recent research has shown that the aspirations of these youth are about as high as those of more affluent youth, yet their chances of attaining their aspired-to career levels are obviously lower. Clearly they need special attention in the competition for education and jobs to offset their deficiencies in family background and personal resources.

The present study is focused specifically on low-income youth in Kentucky. It is part of a Southern Regional Research Project that has been in progress for about 10 years.¹ In 1969, fifth- and sixth-grade children in low-income areas of Magoffin, Wolfe, and Fayette Counties filled out a simple questionnaire in school concerning their educational and occupational aspirations. Six years later, in 1975, an effort was made to re-contact all of the original sample. These youth were then aged 17-19 and mostly juniors or seniors in high school, though a few had graduated and large numbers had dropped out of school. Completed questionnaires were obtained in 1975 from 263 young people, about three-fourths of the original number.² The proportion was somewhat less for the urban, inner-city youth who made up the Fayette County sample and higher for the two rural Appalachian counties. About half of the sample was male and half female. The urban sample (Fayette County) was approximately half black and half white, while all of the rural youth (Magoffin and Wolfe Counties) were white, in keeping with the population of the two rural sample counties.

In addition to questions about the characteristics they most valued in a job and the barriers they perceived in attempting to attain their preferred type of job, the youth were asked in 1975 to name the occupations and levels of education to which they aspired and those they expected to attain. This report will focus on the job characteristics and barriers

¹Project S-63 and successor projects, Agricultural Experiment Stations of Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

²Other reports in this series focus on the changes in these young people over six years of growing up. The questions on which this report is based were not asked in 1969, since it was felt that preadolescents could not very well deal with them.

named by the youth. In addition, the relationships between goals and desired characteristics and perceived barriers will be examined to see if they influence one another or if there are differences by race, sex, or place of residence.

In the analysis of goals the youth who aspired or expected to attain managerial and professional positions were considered to have high occupational goals. Those who aspired or expected to attain semiskilled or unskilled jobs were considered to have low occupational goals. Those naming clerical and skilled jobs were considered to have intermediate goals. Similarly, youth who aspired or expected to attend college were classified as having high educational goals, while those who did not expect or aspire to complete high school or trade school had low educational goals. Those desiring or expecting to complete high school or trade school but not to go further were classified as having intermediate goals.

DESIRED JOB CHARACTERISTICS

In the 1975 re-study each young person was asked to rate the importance of six job characteristics. As Table 1 indicates, the three job characteristics most valued by these low-income youth were that the work be interesting and exciting, that it be steady, and that it give the chance to help other people. The features seen as least important in choosing a job are that it give one a chance to become an important person and that it allow one to be one's own boss. The chance "to make a lot of money" was seen as of intermediate importance. Each of these factors is discussed in more detail on the following page.

Table 1: IMPORTANCE OF SPECIFIED JOB CHARACTERISTICS IN PICKING MOST DESIRED JOB: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES, OLDER YOUTH, 1975.

	Extremely Important	Important	Not Very Important
1. Offers you the chance to make a lot of money	36.4	51.0	12.6
2. Gives you a chance to become an important person	18.9	38.6	42.6
3. Offers a chance for exciting and interesting work	53.2	41.3	5.6
4. Gives you steady employment	52.7	41.8	5.5
5. Gives you a chance to help people	51.2	41.7	7.1
6. Gives you a chance to be your own boss	26.7	31.5	41.8

The chance to make a lot of money was rated as extremely important by 36% of the youth, with 51% seeing it as important and only 13% saying it was not very important. The level of occupational and educational goals expressed by the youth did not seem to influence the importance they attached to the opportunity to make a lot of money. Making money was rated as much more important by males than females. There was no difference between black and white youth with regard to the importance of this factor. Rural youth, however, perceived the chance to make a lot of money as much more important than urban youth. The youth with the higher mental ability

scores³ rated this factor as less important than did other youth.

Most of the youth rated the opportunity a job gives them to become an important person as a somewhat peripheral issue. Less than 20% said it is extremely important, while more than 40% said it is not very important. The youth with the lowest occupational expectations were also least likely to value the chance to become an important person. Perhaps they realized that the jobs they were likely to get would not provide this opportunity. The importance attributed to this trait as an aspect of a future job did not vary significantly by sex, race, or place of residence, but those with higher mental ability or "IQ" saw it as less important than others did.

The opportunity to engage in interesting and exciting work appears very fundamental to these low-income youth. Fifty-three percent of them indicated that this was extremely important, with 41% checking important, and only 6% saying unimportant. Those with the higher occupational and educational goals and those with the higher I.Q. scores expressed the most interest in work being exciting and interesting. Girls were slightly more likely to desire this characteristic in an occupation than were boys, and blacks and rural youth were slightly more likely to see it as important than were whites and urban youth.

Steady employment was also a highly desired trait for future jobs. Only 5% of the adolescents said that steady employment was not important to them. This did not vary by the level of goals expressed nor by sex, race, I.Q., or place of residence. Since these youth are from low-income families, it is very likely that many of them have experienced the frustration of intermittent work by family members. It is also likely that

³As measured in 1969.

their parents have reinforced the importance of steady work to them.

The chance to help other people was a job characteristic highly valued by over half of those queried. Only 7% indicated this to be of little importance. A strong relationship was found between desiring to help others and having high occupational and educational goals. Girls were much more likely to name this job characteristic as important than were boys. Blacks also placed much greater emphasis on the opportunity to help others than did white youth. Urban youth as a whole were somewhat more oriented to helping others than were their rural counterparts. But the youth with higher I.Q. did not differ from others on this factor.

The chance to be one's own boss was not perceived by the youth to be a particularly crucial feature of the job they would like to have. A little over a fourth said this is very important, while 42% said that it is not important. Students desiring managerial and professional jobs and anticipating a college education were no more likely to value this job characteristic highly than those who desired manual occupations. Males more often saw being one's own boss as important than did females, half of whom said it was unimportant. White youth more often considered it important than did black youth. Likewise, many more rural than urban youth saw it as important. High I.Q. students saw it as less important than others.

While the specific job characteristics youth prefer will likely influence their career choices, barriers perceived by the youth may limit their career attainment and, thereby, negate their opportunity to select jobs possessing those desired characteristics. We turn now to an examination of job barriers as they are perceived by low-income youth in Kentucky.

PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO OCCUPATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The youth were asked how much they saw eight specific factors as barriers to getting the kind of job they would like to have (Table 2). Given the American cultural ideal that anyone can rise to attain the job he or she desires, the high aspirations that these young people have expressed, and the limited vertical mobility that actually occurs in our society, it may seem surprising how little these low-income youth see these factors as barriers. Of course one would expect a relationship between the perception of barriers and the type of job desired. Those choosing jobs requiring little skill or training or girls and blacks choosing jobs that are traditional for their groups presumably would not perceive as many barriers as others.

The lack of good job opportunities in the home area was most often seen as a barrier, particularly by the rural youth. The lack of enough money to go to college was next most often seen as a barrier, but only a fourth of the young people said this was very much a barrier. All of the other factors were seen by half or more as little or no problem. Even among blacks, 71% saw race as no major barrier, though an additional 22% saw it as a barrier to some degree. Overwhelmingly, girls saw their sex as no major problem.

Considering that nearly half the youth aspire to attend college and that they come from low-income families, it is surprising that no more than a fourth see lack of money for college as a major barrier. However, an additional third see it as somewhat a problem. The level of the youths' occupational and educational goals does not seem to influence their perceptions concerning money keeping them from college, so those with higher aspirations and plans must believe their parents can send them, they can

work their way through college, or they will receive scholarships. But those with average or above mental ability scores were more likely than others to see this as a barrier. Girls, much more often than boys, perceive their occupational attainment as limited by a lack of money for college. This is at least partly because more girls than boys aspire to college and the professions. But since parents tend to have higher occupational aspirations for boys, it may be that girls fear the limited financial resources available to their families will be preferentially channeled to the boys.

Table 2: EXTENT TO WHICH SELECTED FACTORS ARE PERCEIVED AS BARRIERS TO OBTAINING DESIRED JOBS: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES, OLDER YOUTH, 1975.

	Very Much	Some	Very Little
1. Not enough money to go to college	24.3	32.1	43.6
2. Lack of information about jobs	9.2	43.1	47.7
3. My race	4.8	7.8	87.4
Blacks only	6.9	22.4	70.7
Whites only	4.0	2.9	93.1
4. My sex	3.9	7.9	88.2
Girls only	4.0	12.1	83.9
Boys only	3.8	2.9	93.3
5. Don't want to move away from family and friends	14.8	28.8	56.3
6. Not smart enough	7.8	28.4	63.8
7. The schools I have gone to	6.3	22.1	71.6
8. Lack of good job opportunities around here	33.5	41.9	24.6
Rural only	40.6	37.0	22.5
Urban only	23.5	49.0	27.6

A larger proportion of whites than blacks saw lack of money for college as a severe or a minor problem, while most black youth perceived lack of money to be a small problem. It may be that blacks think more outside financial assistance will be available to them than is actually the case, or else they are more unrealistic about the real problems. There was very little difference between urban and rural youth on this question.

Contrary to the often-made assertion that youth, and particularly low-income rural and ethnic youth, lack adequate knowledge about job opportunities, less than 10% of the subjects believed a lack of such information would severely inhibit their job attainment. Almost half of the youth thought that lack of job information was of little significance or no problem for them. Those with relatively high and relatively low occupational and educational goals responded to this item in about the same way. Neither males nor females indicated that this was a serious problem. Rural youth, whom one might suspect of having less information about a wide range of jobs, did not see lack of information as posing more of a barrier than did urban youth. But the youth with higher I.Q.'s saw it as less a problem than did others.

As one might expect, black youth were much more likely than white youth to see their race as an impediment. Thirty percent of blacks as compared with 7% of whites perceived it to be "very much" or "some" handicap. But what is more surprising is that 70% of the blacks said it would be little or no problem and only 7% of the blacks saw it as a serious handicap. Youth with high educational and occupational goals did not perceive race as more or less a barrier than those with lower goals. It may be that the blacks in the study, whose aspirations are higher than those of the whites, think they will find less discrimination at higher

status levels than they would if they were attempting to enter manual jobs. Boys and girls did not differ in their perception of the effects of race upon their career attainment. But urban youth are much more likely than rural youth to perceive race as a barrier, even when race is controlled. Since they are responding to their own race as a barrier, it appears that some urban white low-income youth see themselves as victims of reverse discrimination.

Almost 90% of the youth believed that their sex would not restrict their job attainment. The only difference between boys and girls was that a few more girls than boys thought sex would make "some" difference and a few less said it would make very little difference. Still, even among girls, 84% saw their sex as little or no barrier to job attainment, and even fewer of the girls with the higher I.Q. scores saw it as a barrier. The youth with higher educational aspirations and expectations anticipated their sex to be less of a barrier than those who had lower educational goals, but there was no such relationship for occupational goals. This finding is interesting in light of the fact that females in the sample expressed somewhat higher goals than did the males. A greater number of blacks than of whites believed that their sex would adversely affect their occupational plans, and urban youth were more concerned about limitations imposed by sex than are rural youth.

Many respondents perceived the possible necessity of leaving family and friends in order to pursue a career as a major barrier to obtaining the job they desired. While 56% of these Kentucky youth responded that leaving family and friends was not a significant problem, 15% of the subjects noted this as very much a problem and 29% indicated that it would affect their job attainment to some degree. Those students with the higher

levels of occupational and educational aspirations and expectations and the higher I.Q. scores perceived leaving family and friends as much less of a barrier than students with lower goals, although it is probable that attaining the higher goals more often requires migration. It appears that the youth with higher goals are not bothered as much by leaving family and friends and therefore plan to migrate, if necessary, to obtain the job of their choice. It is possible, also, that some youth set lower goals for themselves because they do not want to leave and they know the lower-level jobs are available locally. While two-thirds of the males indicated that the desire not to leave family and friends will not inhibit their occupational attainment, only half of the girls said this. This finding seems incongruent with other studies which indicate that girls are more likely to plan to migrate than are boys. But perhaps girls value their careers less than boys, and it is for other reasons that they leave their community (to get married, to get away from home, etc.). White respondents indicated that the problem of leaving loved ones was slightly more of a barrier than blacks do. No difference was found between rural and urban youth in this regard.

Two-thirds of the youth did not feel that "not being smart enough" would inhibit their getting the job they wanted. But 8% felt it would be a severe problem and 28% said it would be somewhat a problem. There is no way of knowing from the data how much the youths' goals may have been adjusted to their own assessment of their intelligence, since we asked about their self-perceived intelligence only in regard to their chosen goals. However, students with the higher scores on the Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Test more often saw not being smart enough as little or no barrier, and there is evidence elsewhere in the study that self-

perceptions of intelligence was generally congruent with test scores. Even so, students with the higher occupational goals perceived lack of intelligence as much less of a barrier than those aspiring to clerical, skilled, and unskilled jobs. Educational goals seemed unrelated, surprisingly enough, to self-doubts about mental ability. Males were slightly less bothered by self-perceived low intelligence than were females, and blacks somewhat less than whites. No relationship was found between place of residence and "not being smart enough" being seen as a barrier.

Although statistical indicators and most experts suggest that public schools in low-income urban areas are inferior to those in the suburbs and that rural schools are generally inferior to urban schools, these youth do not seem to perceive this as fact or as a major barrier to their careers. About three-quarters of the respondents did not feel that the quality of schools they had attended would adversely affect their job chances, while 22% felt this might have some adverse affect and 6% felt it would be severe. The students with the higher I.Q. scores saw their schools as less of a problem than others, but students with high occupational goals perceived the schools they have attended as being a barrier more than did students with lesser goals. Perhaps the former realize they will be competing for the top level jobs with others who come from better schools, or they may simply be more aware of the limitations of their own schools because of greater interest in schooling and careers. Perception of schools attended as a barrier to job attainment did not seem to vary by sex, race, or place of residence.

As previously mentioned, the most seriously perceived barrier to attaining aspirations was a perceived lack of good job opportunities in the local community. A third of the youth rated this as a severe problem,

while only a fourth saw it as little or no problem. While this problem is no doubt real, given the high aspirations of the youth, it is probably also true that these young people are consciously or unconsciously "hedging" against failure to achieve their stated aspirations by being able to blame it on lack of available opportunities. Some credence might be lent to this by the fact that those with higher goals were no more likely to see lack of good local job opportunities as a barrier than were those with lower goals; but, as indicated above, these students seem more willing to migrate to get the desired job. Girls, however, more often saw the lack of local jobs as a severe barrier than did boys. Urban and black youths saw it as less a problem than did rural whites, which likely reflects a real difference in job availability but not necessarily in actual attainment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As to the characteristics they most value in a career or job, these young people in the late adolescent years and from low-income backgrounds present themselves as rather altruistic. They say they value highly a job that is exciting, interesting, and helps other people. They value steady employment over "making a lot of money," as such. They do not seem to give much importance to being one's own boss or becoming a "big shot." But boys are much more likely than girls to value making money and being one's own boss, while girls were much more likely to value the chance to help other people. This suggests continuing sex differentials in the way the two view their societal roles and responsibilities.

Blacks differed from whites in placing more value on helping others and placing less value on being one's own boss. They valued interesting and exciting work a little less than whites. The two did not differ with

regard to the value of making money, steadiness of employment and being an important person. Differential cultural and collective experiential background, as well as differential perceptions of jobs seem reflected in these responses.

The rural white youth were more concerned about making money than were urban youth (blacks and whites together), and they were also more interested in being their own boss, perhaps reflecting the individualism of the rural culture. But rural youth were somewhat less concerned about having exciting work and helping other people.

The youth with the highest goals did not differ from others as to the importance of money-making or being one's own boss, but they valued exciting and interesting work, helping others, and being an important person more than those with lower goals.

The importance of steady employment was the trait on which all the groupings were the most in agreement.

As to perceived barriers to attaining one's desired career job, the impression that comes through is that these youth are not greatly aware of or concerned about the structural or personal barriers to attainment. If this means that they will prepare themselves and work hard toward attainment because they believe there are no serious obstacles in the way, it may be all to the good. But the facts about actual barriers and actual attainment suggest the danger of frustration and disillusionment. Perhaps, however, these young people will become more realistic as they further mature and will be able to adjust their goals and attainment to each other without trauma, neither prematurely lowering their goals nor unrealistically holding to them after it is clear that their attainment will be lower.

Girls are much more likely than boys to see lack of money to attend college as a barrier, and they are more concerned about the possibility of having to leave family, friends, and community to get their desired job. They are slightly more likely to think that "not being smart enough" may be a barrier for them. Girls, more often than boys, perceive a lack of appropriate job opportunities in the home community. They were more likely than boys to see their sex as a barrier, but even so, 84% thought being female would be little or no handicap to getting the job they wanted. Thus, girls seem aware of sex-specific problems of finding the resources to get through college and in getting their desired job in or near the home community, but in general they do not seem much worried about the possible impediments of being female. A part of the reason is that higher proportions of these girls are still choosing "traditional" female jobs, such as nurse, teacher, and secretary.

Surprisingly, fewer blacks than whites thought lack of money to go to college would be a barrier to their desired job. This may be partly because all of the black youth lived in Lexington, where higher education is available on a community basis. Blacks were slightly less concerned than whites about possibly having to leave family and friends to get the desired job, and also somewhat less concerned about "not being smart enough." Like white urban youth, they did not very often see a barrier in lack of jobs of the desired kind in the home community. Almost a third of the black youth thought they might encounter some racial discrimination in getting their desired jobs, but this means that more than two-thirds saw it as little or no problem. The general picture that comes through, from these and other data in the survey, is that the black youth are rather optimistic about their future and, by implication, about the society in

which they live. Their aspirations and expectations at this stage, in late adolescence, were substantially higher than those of the white youth. The big question is whether their high aspirations and optimism will carry them through to a self-satisfactory level of attainment or whether the gap between aspirations and achievement will bring frustration, bitterness, and apathy.

The only substantial difference between urban and rural youth in perceived job barriers was the realistic perception of fewer job opportunities in the home areas of rural youth. Since there were no blacks in the rural sample and the urban sample was about half black, this was responsible for some other small differences.

The youth with higher goals saw having to leave family and friends as much less a barrier than those with lower goals, and they also were less likely to feel that they might not be smart enough. However, they were more likely to see the schools they had attended as a detriment in their career. In other respects, those with high and low goals did not differ much. It seems clear the youths' self-concepts influence their aspirations and expectations in the first place and, perhaps, those with high goals have set them partly because of a desire to leave the home community and seek new experiences wherever the jobs are that will provide them.

The possible job barriers on which there was the least difference between the various groupings in the study was lack of information about jobs. Very few of any group thought this a serious problem, and the rest were about evenly divided between those who saw it as "some" problem and those who saw it as little or no barrier. In their youthful optimism they

may be over-estimating the extent to which they are informed.

These findings should be useful to counselors, other school personnel, parents, and young people themselves. They may suggest gaps and weaknesses in the knowledge and perception base of young people that can be changed through counseling, providing information, and helping youth in self-analysis. The data may be useful starting points for group discussion by young people.

Since so little career projection information is available specifically for young people of deprived backgrounds - especially for the same youths restudied as they mature - these data should fill a gap. But care should be exercised in generalizing these findings to all youth. Other findings from this continuing research will be presented in forthcoming reports.